

The place of emotions in the non-dual approach by Didier Weiss

In most of the so-called spiritual circles, emotions do not have a very good press. They are supposedly the cradle of the greatest evils in the universe, the main reason for inner and outer conflicts, the origin of our fragmented lives.

Emotions and Spirituality don't go well together. Spirituality with a capital S, of course... They are quite often looked down with sarcasm or even contempt, regardless of their nature: a sudden outburst of anger facing an injustice, a sense of wonderment watching a sunset, a shed of tears upon the death of a loved one, or again a moment of tenderness meetings the eyes of a newborn baby.

Too often synonymous with emotivity or emotional instability, emotions point to a psychological fragility that should be remedied at all costs or else... our life is a failure, we are preys to our emotions. Something needs to be fixed. We sometimes spend a whole lifetime rehashing our painful stories, forgetting how incredibly beautiful each moment of our lives truly is. No amount of therapy seems to work, we may even never see the end of our emotional suffering. And all the while we spend fixing ourselves and our issues, the bigger failures we seem to feel.

At the very best, emotions appear to be a matter of personal development and improved well-being, and remain inherently unspiritual in nature. So let's explore today the place of emotions in the non-dual approach.

The Life of the Wise, preconceived ideas

"Wisdom" points to perfect self-control, both on the inner and outer levels whatever the circumstances. True wisdom implies imperturbability. A sage knows neither laughter nor tears, not even tension.

Wisdom also points to permanent and absolute detachment. This sense of detachment no longer allows feelings to arise, emotions to develop and thrive, and thus avoids the disastrous work of undermining and division.

For the deserving, this imperturbability is the result of relentless spiritual work, like Hercules taming the thousand-headed Hydra; for the unlucky, the result of a terrible ordeal; or for the fortunate, a fortuitous and unhoped gift from Grace.

Hence the sacrosanct image of the imperturbable Sage, identical to himself in the best and worst case scenarios, an unmovable and insensitive rock, a simple Witness of the "Lila", of the unreality of this world and therefore of his own humanity.

But then, why did Nisargadatta Mahara, the renowned sage who led a quite ordinary life in a working-class district of Bombay, frequently lose his temper with his visitors? His exasperation at their ignorance could go so far as to throw them out of his house! Many similar anecdotes are reported about educated sages with measured speech and attitude such as Yogananda, Papaji, UG Krishnamurti, Ramesh Balsekar, and a few more. Some Sufi or Zen masters are even specifically known for their anger, which will be seen as "holy anger", a potentially powerful teaching tool. As for the supreme reference, Ramana Maharshi, he was known for weeping with joy or sorrow from time to time, and also for occasionally scolding his disciples.

The life of the Wise, revised and corrected

Let's be clear here: The wise who has realised his innermost nature may go through the whole gamut of emotions. Depending on the genetic inheritance and the innate and acquired conditioning of each individual, feelings and emotions do appear as circumstances arise. Their manifestation can take any form, from the most poignant despair to the purest joy. The wise is by no means immune to them. This said, there is a big difference here between, let's say, a common man and a sage. This full range of emotions is no longer an "absolute value". It is no longer a range that defines and encompasses the totality of his "life", as we generally understand our life, the life we believe to be our own, so very unique and personal.

Emotions are experienced as ocean waves appearing from the infinite depth of who we are, unfolding on the surface and disappearing back into the infinite depth of who we really are. They are relative events that do not affect our true essence. Within the story taking place, the events seem to take up all the space, but in fact they do not.

Nothing really changes for the wise except that emotions, seen for what they are, no longer have a personal hold on "the one who knows". They don't carry him away. And there is also no specific effort towards detachment. Emotions are neither encouraged nor discouraged, and they are accepted for what they are: limited events within an immense, non-defining story.

From 2D to 3D

Reading books, watching movies, listening to music, and more basically living "our" every day life... All these activities require an emotional connection with the elements in presence - sensory and cognitive information - to generate meaning. Initially, neither the connection nor the meaning are included in the content of the information. It is "our" participation that creates the meaning, the story and therefore the richness of the information. Emotions are the building blocks. To remove them would be tantamount to reducing this 3D life to a flat 2D story, a life that is a priori tidier, cleaner and therefore "wiser" or "holier", but impoverished.

A full life, a life that is really lived, is woven like an antique rug whose complex weft is made of wool or silk fibres, raw or treated, new or old, and which may have been torn and darned here and there many times over the course of its existence. The richness, depth and beauty of it comes alive thanks to the emotions they bring about upon looking it and caressing it with our hand.

Emotions are the fabric of Life. In order to be reconciled with them, all we have to do is to look at life in all its aspects without exception, without preference or rejection for one aspect or another, very much like when we look at an antique rug. Beyond the gaze, when we pass our hand over it to enjoy it fully, we appreciate its texture and depth in an intimate and immediate way. It appears as an indivisible whole, its beauty becomes indescribable with words, it is a raw undisguised feeling of aliveness.

Just labels

A persistent idea is that "objects" exist. Or rather that objects exist by themselves, whether they are created by human hands, present in nature or the fruit of our imagination. Let's take some examples. that are commonly believed.

A chair exists. It is made of wood or metal, it has four legs and a back. It has a name, it is a chair and not a stool. It has a function, it is made for sitting. Giving it an existence has a practical side in everyday life. But are we really sure that it exists by itself?

A mountain exists. It has a particular and recognisable shape. It has been called Arunachala. It is sacred. Giving it an existence also has a functional side. It is useful to know where it is if you want to go there. But is it really separate from the rest of the landscape?

Similarly, thoughts, feelings and emotions exist. We seem to exist as body-minds with each a name, a gender, a profession, a religion, a story with ups and downs, successes and failures. But are we really individual beings separate from the whole? Are these thoughts, feelings and emotions really ours?

As such, Existence is indeed the common element, the shared essence of all objects. But we must realize that Existence is not the property of objects, just as the screen is not the property of a film, nor is water the property of a wave. Certainly, objects - things, thoughts, feelings, emotions - seem to exist, but they by no means have a limited existence of their own. The existence of all things that appear belongs to the Source, whatever name one gives it "Consciousness, Beingness, Presence, God, Peace, Silence"...

Isolating one of the modulations of Consciousness - in this case emotions - from the Source and forgetting that this label is merely a relative concept - however useful it may be but not ultimately "true"- brings fragmentation into our lives. It causes suffering by isolating a part of the story, the emotional part that would exist by itself and which we would have to handle, fix, repair or even repress and suppress.

By playing this "isolation game", we wrongly grant objects a life of their own. And this is how we come to the paradox that working hard on fixing our so called emotions in order to get out of the circle of psychological suffering more often than not create more suffering and make things worse.

The "thinking mind", a tireless generator of emotions

The mechanism that creates the fragmentation of our lives is well oiled: it is what we generally call our "mind". In order to make a clear distinction between, let's say, the useless mind and the useful mind, Ramesh Balsekar came up with two helpful concepts: the "thinking mind" and the "working mind".

On one hand, the 'thinking mind' is the mind that never leaves us alone, except for the time when we are in deep sleep. This so called mind is nothing more than thoughts that come and go haphazardly or in a relentless loop leaving us exhausted. It is on automatic pilot, whether we are aware of it or not. This narrative, self-referential, mind comes up with scary or painful stories, the worst part of it is that it makes up non stop comments and pass judgments over every single moment of our waking life tirelessly and unnecessarily, very much like a friendly but annoying parrot perched on our shoulder perfectly satisfied with its own continuous and repetitive chatter.

On the other hand, the "working mind" is the mind that helps us accomplish all kinds of tasks, from very simple to highly complex tasks that are key to our survival and well-being. This functioning mind is a tool that we pick up when we need and we leave aside when we don't. It allows us to be functional on a daily basis and its role ends up there.

It is therefore only the "thinking mind" that generates the essential part of this omni and ever present tsunami of positive and negative emotions that affects our life, and transform it into a roller coaster of sort with super high moments and super low moments and all in between... And all the while, we are oblivious to the fact that emotions are as hallucinatory as the thoughts that created them!

When this distinction is intimately seen, in the absence of this highly energy-consuming “thinking mind”, positive or negative emotions do not cease to appear. They keep on coming and going as Life runs its course. Nevertheless, a radical emotional simplification takes place. What I would call "true emotions" in all their ruthless rawness have a chance to emerge, to unfold fully, to tell their stories as they please in all their perfection, beauty, complexity, intensity and depth, but then – and this is the key difference – they disappear without leaving any trace.

The "subject-object relationship", another powerful generator of emotions

A whole part of the human psyche feeds on - and in fact could not survive - without this hallucinatory state called the 'subject-object relationship'.

We, so called human beings, like to imagine that we are defined therefore limited separate subjects, independent from surrounding objects. With this idea and even persistent felt experience of really being an individual person, several specific emotions may appear from time to time in our lives. They may either upset us more or less briefly but at times they persist.

Ramesh Balsekar had come up with a list of them, among which you can find: arrogance, pride, shame, guilt, anxiety, fear, hatred, malice, jealousy, envy.

When the attachment to the idea of an individual person ceases, when the person is seen as never having really existed as such - like the water in the mirage - our essential nature, timeless and limitless, is recognised. And the suffering these emotions normally entail has no more personal soil to grow in and thrive on.

When emotions are uprooted with their root too, that is to say here with the belief in a separate person, they make way for what we might call "true emotions" in all their authenticity.

We can note that the emotional and psychological suffering of life may disappear gradually or abruptly, there is no rule. However when this being the case, it becomes impossible for these very specific emotions to arise from the moment our real nature is revealed in all its transparency.

Our emotional energy, a real waste

Living in the grip of the sense of separation constantly demands energy to re-create itself at every moment. It implies a mountain of beliefs in past, present and future times, in the vastness of space, in the meaning of life, in self-importance and many more.... All these beliefs are loaded with a large emotional potential that weighs us down.

Life is simplicity and lightness itself. Awakening to our true nature does not bring something extra special that was missing before, quite the contrary. This so familiar virtual world of separation that we see as so completely “real” is actually based on a primary hallucination and unfolds from an absolute void. This is the magic work of Maya the enchantress... whereas Something is created out of Nothing! One can only laugh about this... when it is seen clearly.

"Life is just a passing shadow, an actor who struts and bobs for his hour on stage and then is no longer heard. It is a story told by a fool, full of sound and fury, and signifying nothing. " William Shakespeare

Maya will use all the tricks she can come up with to make our personal story believable and therefore real to us. This enchantress makes us feel as if we exist as individuals, as if we have a reason to exist, as if there is a meaning to our lives! As if only...

This life as we generally know it - this life in duality - demands a lot of energy, a ceaseless dedication and unflinching devotion to perpetuate itself. Now, when this energy capital is no longer used to project a false sense of self, living in a false world, with its non stop emotional wastage, this energetic potential can be better used.

The story of our life becomes infinitely simpler and lighter, and at the same time more spicy and juicy. The experience, for example of joy or sorrow - is real in the moment, however emotions come to their natural, impersonal place. Emotions provide a magical enrichment with no judgement or preference whatsoever. They bring contrast and extra colours, and thus an infinitely richer, more beautiful and deeper picture that is never fixed for ever or gets old. It is ever fresh, renewed in the moment upon each new moment.

Emotions at Maya's service

What holds us so tightly to the idea of being a person located in a definite place and time, that was born and will die, of believing that we inhabit a body and a mind, is an emotional attachment.

The world seems incredibly real because this reality is created incessantly, through the filter of our emotions such as a fear of the future and a deep desire for continuity of our person. When emotions stop being active in our lives, the whole range of likes and dislikes, of aversions and attachments which we generally call ourselves and that define "our character, our personality", simply vanish. And from there another possibility of life, of Freedom, emerges.

Emotions at the service of Awakening

Paradoxically, this intimate revolution that is generally called "Awakening" rarely happens by itself. More often than not, it requires heavy duty fuel: an emotional type of focussed energy in its purest and most intense form. This fuel has nothing to do with compassion or tranquility, rather the opposite: a strong aspiration, a burning desire that does not seem very... "spiritual" at first glance!

Let's face it, rockets are not launched by chanting mantras! We might say that resisting and getting rid of the ego's pull requires a similar kind and amount of energy as what would be needed to launch a rocket! It is a fact that a huge quantity of energy seems to be required for this resolution/dissolution. This has been well documented in many traditions. (To find out more about this particular topic, you can look up the "energy saving techniques" recounted by Carlos Castaneda.)

The idea here is to gather together this enormous emotional potential - usually scattered all over the place and therefore wasted in a thousand activities that alas only contribute to the reinforcement of the Dream, and focus it on one and only goal: resolving the essential question "Who am I really? ", no longer simply with the intellect but through "our" whole existence.

The recognition of our true nature is only waiting for this yearning. At some point, the evidence sets in. The assumption that what I thought I was, "a being defined, limited and tossed about by the wind of thoughts and feelings" vanishes to the benefit of the recognition "I know myself". I am an indivisible space, a space that is not limited to the mind only, that is my fleeting thoughts, emotions, sensations, perceptions. I am unlimited in time and space, and unaffected by circumstances.

Occasionally, it turns out that an emotional reaction to an old memory may emerge. Emotional reactions come from habit. It is immediately seen as unimportant and instantly fades away by itself. It is a habit that will disappear on its own sooner when you stop paying the slightest attention.

By investigating from silence, all kinds of emotions may appear in the foreground and silence may seem to recede into the background. There is no need to react. Emotions will go away on their own, in their due time, just as they came. One possibility of transcending emotions is based on not repressing them and at the same time simply not feeding them. At some point, emotions fade inevitably, they always do, and silence seems to return to the foreground, though it had never actually left the foreground...

The balanced state, or true equanimity

The discovery of our boundless and timeless nature, or perhaps even simply a taste of it, reveals a previously unimaginable possibility of an emotional life, intense as well as balanced. A life of equanimity which is by no means dull.

Equanimity is a fundamental form of emotional intelligence. It is both profound and subtle but often misunderstood and easily confused with emotional suppression or repression, apathy, indifference or even worse, insensitivity!

The word equanimity comes from Latin: "aequus" means "balanced", and "animus" "inner state". Therefore, equanimity is synonymous of inner balance.

When our physical balance is disturbed, we fall on one side or the other. The same is true of our inner balance. If every time an emotion arises, we completely identify with what happens, or try hard to suppress the emotion, we fall prey to it by playing an active part in the story it tells. It causes imbalance and we are at a risk of emotionally falling, and failing again and again.

Between identification and suppression, there is a balancing point which could be called "true equanimity". And this is where lies the place of emotions in non-duality.

This balanced state allows Life to freely and gratefully bloom whatever the circumstances, without ever positioning itself in a particular point that we would call "ourselves".

We say goodbye to that focal point that did not really exist, only we believed it did. And we enter the space of unconditional acceptance of our fundamental nature. Emotions come and go in all their magnitude, Life is lived according to "What is". All is already accepted since it is already here. But our essential nature can never be forgotten or lost and remains unchanged for it is what we are.

PS: Dialogue extract from the book "Explorations non duelles":

"Equanimity comes from Acceptance without judgment or reservation, without negotiation or speculation.

If someone tortured my daughter in front of me, would I be equanimous? Yes, if I were a yogi with perfect control of my impulses. Which I am not at all, on the contrary. So what equanimity are we talking about?

We are talking about our essential nature, which is Equanimity, Acceptance, Welcome. And that includes the not so equanimous father fighting for his daughter's life.

You sense that equanimity is an important aspect of who we are and you are right. However, this intuition, however accurate, will not apply to "you" and "your" so-called earth life. It actually does not apply anywhere in the material world for it is the very nature of the one Subject."